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AUTHOR Pickles, T. Anthony
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ABSTRACT

The United Kingdom higher education system is being encouraged to provide opportunities for students to acquire key skills/employability skills and to become better learners with a greater awareness of their individual learning needs, including the need to develop habits that will lead to lifelong learning. A number of issues need to be resolved when making provision for key skills opportunities in degree programs. These are: (1) embedded or taught independently; (2) assessment; (3) accreditation; (4) finding time in the program; (5) staff motivation and development; and (6) centralized or de-centralized provision. Students acquire knowledge and skills through part-time jobs and involvement in student activities, through membership in the many societies and the students' union, and by acting as a course representative. An instrument through which the inputs and activities--key skills and personal development opportunities--can be drawn together is the personal development file in which the student records his/her achievements and reflects upon them, emphasizing what he or she has learned. (YLB)

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Crossroads of the New Millennium

Encouraging Students To Acquire Key Skills And Manage Their Own Learning

Prepared and Presented

By

Dr. T. Anthony Pickles

Key Skills Project Manager

Industrial Technology

University of Bradford

email : T.A.Pickles@Bradford.ac.uk

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Poster Presentation

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Abstract

The UK Higher Education system is being encouraged to provide opportunities for students to acquire key skills/employability skills, and for them to become better learners with a greater awareness of their individual learning needs, including the need to develop habits that will lead to life-long learning. The paper considers some of the main issues in terms of the key skills debate and the wider learning agenda, and it examines the concept of the personal development file as an instrument that offers the potential to achieve a number of important objectives to the benefit of students, staff and HE institutions.

Encouraging Students to Acquire Key Skills and Manage their Own Learning

INTRODUCTION

A number of interesting developments are taking place in UK higher education which have the potential for making learning more satisfactory, for producing graduates who are more attractive to employers, for creating a basis for life-long learning, and for more-nearly satisfying the demands that society rightly places on the system. The principal developments are: the encouragement for students to acquire what have come to be called key skills and the acceptance by HE institutions to make the necessary provision, the encouragement for students to take advantage of ALL possible opportunities to acquire skills, including those available outside the lecture room be this by undertaking voluntary work in the community or participating in students union activity, and the encouragement for them to take some responsibility for their own learning by becoming aware of their learning needs, reflecting on their learning, and perhaps keeping some kind of record or log, or what is becoming fairly widely known as a personal development file.

Whilst offering substantial potential benefits these developments are not likely to be realised without detailed planning, extra investment in resources, and not least, a radical change in culture in some institutions. The paper examines the various issues, taking key skills first, then considering the acquisition of skills outside the curriculum, and finally bringing this together by discussing the concept of the personal development file.

ACQUIRING KEY SKILLS WITHIN THE DEGREE PROGRAMME

The UK Government has shown itself to be acutely aware of the need to have students in higher education who will graduate not only with the traditional intellectual qualities and skills, but also with skills that will make them attractive to employers and will create a sound basis for life-long learning. To this end both they and individual institutions have invested considerable sums of money in order to address a perceived need to improve the nation's competitive performance and to answer employer complaints that graduates come to them with a deficit in fundamental skills such as the ability to communicate, to work in teams, and even to demonstrate an ability in basic numeracy.

There is plenty of evidence from employer surveys over the past few years to be certain that their prime interest is in recruiting graduates who possess the appropriate non-academic, or transferable skills; indeed, for many firms this is of more importance than the particular academic subject the student has studied. There is nothing new about this thinking: in the early 1990s a report concluded that "it was personal attitudes (motivation, character and attitudes) and the 'non-academic skills' which were most important. Among the latter, the ability to work as part of a team, and social and communications skills were most sought after." Similarly, according to the report it was "becoming increasingly apparent that at least 40% of job opportunities are not geared to any specific training or set of subjects studied."

1. It seems only fair to say that many HE institutions have been always been aware of the need to adopt a wider definition of student development than the traditional intellectual one, not only because it is held to be right, but also because one of the critical performance measures is graduate employment rate. To this end they have, for example, made provision for teaching communications skills, encouraged group and team activities, and so on. However, the whole key skills agenda was given a substantial boost as a result of the report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing (the 'Dearing Report') which recommended that learning outcomes should be specified in, amongst other aspects, key skills; these skills were listed as communications, numeracy, use of information technology, and learning how to learn.
2. There is no single list of key skills but the 'Dearing four' are now widely accepted and a further two are included in the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's (QCA) list, namely working with others and problem solving. This is itself based on the earlier NCVQ *core* skills list, renamed *key* skills in 1996
3. The six QCA key skills form what has become known as the national framework and is backed by a comprehensive set of criteria for assessing and achieving the skill at a number of different levels.

There is no suggestion, as far as one is aware, that this precise framework will be forced on institutions, and indeed it seems likely that many would find it unacceptable given its perceived bureaucratic format. This, of course, is a very different position to the now widely held view that HE institutions should engage in skills development of their students in the

broad sense. What they regard as important skills, or key skills, is left to institutions, and even departments within institutions, to decide just which skills are appropriate for them and this will probably remain the position.

Other lists of desirable skills that graduates should possess have been produced from time to time, some of them far longer than the ones noted above; the Association of Graduate Recruiters, for example, talk about 'self-reliance skills' and list twelve aspects including amongst other things - perhaps better described as attributes, rather than skills - self-confidence, coping with uncertainty, political awareness, etc. Appropriately for us in the present discussion they say that "the self-reliant graduate is aware of the changing world of work, takes responsibility for his or her own career and personal development and is able to manage the relationship with work and with learning throughout all stages of life." (4).

A number of issues need to be resolved when making provision for key skills opportunities in degree programmes and these are as follows:

a) **Embedded or taught independently.** Whether key skills should be integrated in the curriculum or delivered as independent stand-alone modules is a matter for debate and decision. There is no correct answer, but rather advantages and disadvantages in both cases. The arguments for embedding (that is, building into the curriculum) are that academics will have to take key skills more seriously and are more likely to accept ownership; students will see key skills as more real and relevant if they are directly related to subject matter; skills such as problem solving and communications have the potential for helping students improve their academic performance.

   The arguments against this methodology, and therefore in favour of creating stand-alone/purpose-designed modules, are that academics might well feel that they are not qualified to teach key skills; similarly teaching key skills will leave less time, academics might argue, for the subject matter; there could be student resistance in that some will feel that they entered university to learn about physics, or economics, etc. But, of course, this argument could apply however the key skills are delivered.

b) **Speakers – Reports Assessment.** Difficulty in measuring student ability and competence in some key skills is thought to be difficult; for example, how is a person's ability to work with others to be measured. Further, how are different levels or degrees of attainment and competence to be measured? (It should be noted, however, that the national QCA framework noted above does provide detailed assessment criteria for all the skills).

c) **Accreditation.** There has been considerable debate in the UK on whether separate recognition, say in the form of a certificate, should be given to students who have acquired key skills. Where a student has acquired an array of personal skills through, for example, extra curricular activity how might this be recognised formally? One well-publicised scheme is the 'York Award' developed by York University; the author's own institution is piloting a City and Guilds Personal Development Award.

d) **Finding Time in the Programme.** Justified or not, it might be felt that some degree programmes are already overcrowded and cannot stand to be 'burdened' with any 'extra' material. It would, however, be a very hard line to take and seems unlikely that even the most crowded course could not find some time in which to help students develop skills that make them more employable. As a minimum it would now be generally agreed that HE institutions should accept some responsibility for providing opportunities for students to enhance their personal skills.

e) **Staff Motivation and Development.** A further issue is that of academic staff motivation: how can they be motivated to put across and teach aspects of student personal development which is perhaps outside their own direct experience and individual subject specialism? Is it reasonable to expect them to do so? Should it be carried out by specialist staff or those particularly interested in student welfare and development rather than shared between all staff in a department? What is the role for staff development? There might well be different models within the same institution; in the author's institution one department has all staff sharing in a study skills programme which is organised through the personal tutor system; another department has two members of staff who take a particular interest in this aspect and undertake it in addition to their own specialist subject teaching.

f) **Centralised or De-centralised Provision?** A further issue, closely related to points a) and f) above, concerns the level within an institution at which provision for key skills should be made. There are arguments for providing it centrally across the institution where specialists can offer their services; duplication is avoided and it should be possible to take advantage of scale economies. On the other hand the particular departmental and subject flavour is lost which might or might not be thought to be important; again, there might well be timetabling complexities in centralised provision.

ACQUIRING SKILLS OUTSIDE THE CURRICULUM AND DEGREE PROGRAMME

The enormous value of acquiring skills through work-based learning/sandwich courses/co-operative education has long been recognised by all involved in such schemes, indeed many would argue that degree programmes which integrate work placements with the academic input are superior to 'straight academic' degrees (5). (The arguments will be familiar: students mature; they learn about the world of work in the widest sense; they have opportunities to acquire new skills and enhance existing skills; they are likely to become more confident; they are likely to be more attractive to employers on graduation, and so on).(6). The Dearing Commission recognised the benefits that work experience can confer and recommended an expansion in such provision.

Under the present heading the focus is not on such formal provision where a work placement of, say, six or twelve months is an integral part of the degree, but informal work and other student activity outside the curriculum. Whilst the value of formal work placements has been recognised attention more recently has focused on the possible benefits accruing from other, less formal activity; in other words there is the potential for acquiring many skills through part-time jobs which students often - and now more frequently are forced to - undertake, and from involvement in student activities.

Students 'even' working in a bar or filling shelves in a super market acquire skills: they work with other people, they might well have to handle difficult customers, they will certainly have to communicate, they might well have to manage their time effectively and plan ahead, they

might have opportunities to observe how managers operate and how the firm functions. The important point is to make students aware of the opportunities for learning and to encourage them to take advantage of the opportunities.

Many opportunities exist in universities and colleges for involvement in student activities, both through the many societies and through the students union and by acting as a course representative. Skills acquisition in many forms is to be had and, to some extent, it is a matter of raising awareness and making explicit what was previously implicit. By becoming involved in union and society activities students can hope to develop, amongst other skills, time management, chairing meetings, debating and presenting cases, listening and other communications skills, team working, assertiveness; by helping with the production of newsletters and other publications writing skills and IT skills can be enhanced. In some cases students act as mentors to students in other year groups thus gaining yet another type of skill.

Another way of looking at such activity is to accept that there is a broader learning agenda than the traditional one that focuses on the development of purely intellectual skills (not that anyone is attempting to downgrade this); similarly, there are lots of learning opportunities via which to develop both personal and technical skills if only students can be both made aware of them and encouraged to participate in them. A number of institutions have achieved this by means of publishing information booklets and guides, often co-ordinated by students for students. The author's institution has for the past two years produced a directory of opportunities entitled 'Stepping Stones to Success' which lists opportunities in the students union and related spheres and some of the opportunities for involvement in the local community (e.g. Special Constabulary); produced by the students, this has been distributed across the university. Personal tutors have been asked to help raise awareness amongst their tutees of the many opportunities which exist and to encourage them to make maximum use of these, without jeopardising their routine academic work, of course!

Running in parallel with this is a student training function led by the Student Development Co-ordinator, a full-time person whose principal remit is to train course representatives and to offer support in training students to train fellow students. This function has been expanded to include offering tuition to students in some of the personal skills and study skills.

THE CONCEPT OF THE PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT FILE (PDF)

The instrument through which the above inputs and activities - key skills and personal development opportunities - can be drawn together is the personal development file in which the student records his/her achievements and reflects upon them, emphasising what he/she has learned.

This concept, although certainly not new, is at the heart of current debate in UK higher education and the subject of a consultation process being carried out by the HE Quality Assurance Agency following recommendation 20 of the Dearing Commission (2). This recommended "that institutions of higher education, over the medium term, develop a Progress File. The file should consist of two elements: a transcript recording student achievement," and second "a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development." The Dearing Commission used the term personal development planning, arguing that this would act as an aid to learning (knowing how/what/when to learn), as an aid to personal development (know/improve self), and as a means of maintaining evidence of learning and capability of both a formal and informal nature which students could use when presenting themselves to employers.

Various terms are in use and, in the main, they describe what amounts to the same thing: the student maintains some kind of learning log, reflective journal, personal development file, personal and academic file, professional academic file. The essential point is that the process requires reflection on what has been, and is being, learned and on planning for future learning. This clearly relates to the skills development discussed above both in the formal sense where it is part of the curriculum within modules and the wider degree programme, and to the less formal aspects developed by extra-curricular means.

There is now a substantial amount of evidence within the wider UK HE system from which to conclude that such a process is worth embarking upon. The PADSHE (Personal and Academic Development for Students in Higher Education) programme, initiated by Nottingham University's English Department, is one of the more publicised schemes and has claimed quite an impressive degree of success at institutions where it has been piloted. Not

least of the aspects in which such schemes are seen to be successful is the way they link to personal tutor systems and hence to improved student support mechanisms.

The consultation document on Progress Files issued by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) listed a range of benefits, in addition to the potential for improving personal tutoring, which they felt would result from the introduction of the concept. For students these are: improved capacity to plan their own academic programmes; more effective monitoring and reviewing of own progress; improved awareness of how they are learning, etc; recognition of own strengths and weaknesses; recognition of opportunities for learning and personal development outside the curriculum; better preparedness for employment.

For staff the benefits are, in the view of the consultation document: more independent learners; more effective use of learning experience; a mechanism for recording career-related skills; improved understanding of the development of individual students and ability to write more meaningful references. Related benefits were also listed for departments and institutions.

The important point is that the principal aim is to help students to become more effective learners by helping them understand HOW they are learning and to discourage the idea that learning is a one-off activity. Like the key skills agenda, however, there are issues to consider, not least the possibility that students will fail to see the value of the PDF. There is likely to be a need to sell the concept to both students and staff and to provide the necessary training and development. It might be deemed necessary to introduce a system of reward and/or sanctions according to whether the PDF is completed satisfactorily, one possibility being to build in a mark as part of the assessment of, say, a skills-related module.

A fundamental issue concerns the basic format of the PDF; there are several models currently in use in the UK, many of them similar but with slight differences which cater for perceived departmental and/or subject needs, for differences in departmental culture, and in some cases according to whether the PDF is related to professional institution requirements. A decision on the degree to which the PD is to be integrated with the personal tutor system also needs to

be made. Finally, some departments have included a learning styles questionnaire with the PDF so that the first task for new students is to discover more about how they learn and what their learning needs are; in this way particular weaknesses can be addressed at an early stage.

CONCLUSION

Students are certainly being encouraged by many HE institutions in the UK to acquire key skills and personal skills that will make them more employable and create a basis for life-long learning. Institutions have come to acknowledge that they have a duty not only to prepare students for work by encouraging them to acquire skills, but also to provide opportunities for such acquisition, be this through appropriate curriculum design or via participation in extra-curricular activity

This philosophy behind this thinking is conveniently summed up as follows: "Higher Education has traditionally been based on the assumption that key skills would automatically, if not incidentally, be acquired by students during their undergraduate studies, either through the curriculum or as a by-product of self-directed extra-curricular activities. This Project will address the need for universities to accept more consciously a responsibility for the provision of opportunities for student self-development and key skills acquisition, and further enhance their employability." (7).

There is also a significant move to a situation where students do more to manage their own learning. The concept of the personal development file with the associated personal and academic development planning would appear to offer a valuable means of accomplishing this aim; encouraging students to reflect on all aspects of their learning, to be conscious of their learning needs, and to constantly seek to improve weak aspects in their studying and their performance, can only create more effective learners.

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